

## **Intersectionality and Language Education: Current Status and Future Directions**

By James Coda, Western Colorado University & University of Georgia,  
United States

&

J.M. Paiz, The George Washington University, United States

In 2019, at the American Association for Applied Linguistics Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, a colloquium on queering language education brought together various scholars to discuss how they conceptualize queer theories/pedagogies in their research endeavors. After the colloquium, we both considered what else we could add to the conversation surrounding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Others (LGBTQ+) issues in language education. As there is a paucity of attention to LGBTQ+ issues (Nelson, 2009), and moreover, intersectionality, we decided to compose an edited volume that utilized Crenshaw's (1990) notion of intersectionality in relation to LGBTQ+ issues in language education. As the field of applied linguistics has embraced the social turn (Block, 2003), however, Paiz and Coda (2021) illuminated the dearth of attention to intersectionality. In writing this piece, then, we share our own reflections related to intersectionality and the impacts of such an approach to LGBTQ+ issues in language teaching and learning.

### **J.M. Paiz**

For me, writing a book on intersectional issues in gender and sexuality studies, as they pertain to language teaching and learning, could never be done alone. For a book like *Intersectional Perspectives on LGBTQ+ Issues* to exist, it really needed a team of authors working together to explore a variety of intersections to really highlight the emergent, conflicted, and negotiated nature of intersectional work. This becomes even more critical when we are thinking of the advantageous and deleterious effects of intersectional forces in society. How can I, as an ostensibly cis, pansexual brown man, *really* be able to speak to intersections about which

I have little personal experience? This is complicated by the fact that I am mixed-race, and for part of the year – due to lighter skin tone and a linguistic style closer to white, middle class than my working-class Latinx roots – can pass rather easily as a member of more dominant social groups.

So, when approached by a series editor from Palgrave about doing a book that was focused on intersectionality in my field, I knew I would need help. Not just to do the topic justice, but also to create space for intersectionality to play out on the page. This collection, written as it was by eight different authors from varying social, sexual, religious, political, age, ability, gender, and career backgrounds, allowed us to not only explore facets of intersectionality that simply would not have occurred to one, two, or even three authors. It also allowed us to (in)effectively showcase the intersectionality in the pages of our book, as each contributor took a conflux of different methodological approaches and theoretical underpinnings to drive their work. Moreover, having authors from different career points and, concomitantly, with different material affordances plays out in print with what some might see as differing levels of perceived “rigor” or a preference for one style of research over the other. However, I would argue that what we may be seeing is another layer of intersectional forces playing out. For example, being a cis-male in a role of a graduate student creates a certain set of affordances and constraints that may contribute to choosing a certain research methodology – likely one closely aligned to your major professor/advisor and dissertation work. Similarly, being a trans-man in the role of a tenure track professor, but with elder-care responsibilities, may allow access to greater institutional affordances that would facilitate more “robust” research or more longitudinal research. However, this is counter-balanced by the constraint of elder-care responsibilities, which can introduce considerable limitations of time and place, leading to a preference for scholarship over research. This act of doing “scholarship” instead of “hard research” may then lead to career and life implications that wouldn’t exist if the person inhabited other intersectional subjectivities.

As a field, applied linguistics focuses rather heavily on teaching and learning. This means that almost everything we do is motivated by classroom considerations, from pedagogy and practice to understanding student/teacher interactions and preparing future and early-service educators for the rigors of teaching. It is here that intersectionality’s true

potential lies. It can be tempting to suggest that teaching should be apolitical, ideological, and divorced from the personal. However, as they say in rhetoric and composition, it is already-always politically, ideologically, and personally fraught. Therefore, understanding how intersections of womanhood, bisexuality, and spirituality can impact not only a practitioner's view of teaching but also how those students perceive that teaching – and accept its validity – becomes critically important. Not to shoehorn the educator into a normative box of “good teaching only looks like X”, but to better inform how we build inclusive and equitable teaching and learning environments, and to provide context for teaching evaluations as a flawed tool – if one could really even call it that – to measure teacher efficacy. Likewise, understanding how teacher-as-collection-of-intersections and students-as-collection-of-intersections meet, interact, influence, and push-back against each other could have radical potential for re-figuring the language classroom. By understanding this better, we may even begin to trouble notions of “good” student or good learner. Once we begin to consider intersectional forces like socioeconomic standing, immigrant status, and race, the disengaged English as a Second Language (ESL) learner may be found to be less in need of remedial learning and more in need of institutional acculturation support and acceptance. From my perspective, an intersectional view of teaching and learning requires us to first shrug off oft-deeply entrenched assumptions that are based on deficit models of the learner.

### **James Coda**

My chapter of our edited volume centered on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer (LGBQ) world language educators' experiences in the Southeastern United States. I use the acronym, LGBQ, in lieu of LGBTQ+ as there were no participants who identified as transgender. In the study, I specifically focused on LGBQ teachers. I was formerly a middle and high school Spanish teacher in North Carolina before beginning my doctoral studies. While I was a K-12 educator, I lived in a rural area with my husband, Matthew Rogers. In the first school where I was employed, I had to oftentimes eschew questions related to my relationship as well as my identity so that I would not face reprisal. In the second school, I worked about one mile from my house. As we lived in a rural area where everyone was acquainted, the students, teachers, and staff were aware of my relationship with my husband. However, I did not draw attention to my

relationship, and I still avoided questions concerning my relationship with my husband. My experiences were the impetus for my 2020 dissertation, which then became part of the chapter in our edited volume. In my study, I sought to understand the teachers' experiences as well as their challenges to heteronormativity in their classrooms and schools.

As there is a legacy of *No-Promo-Homo*<sup>1</sup> policies in states such as Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas, and South Carolina (McGovern, 2012), I found it essential to center my research on LGBTQ+ teachers in Southeastern United States. In my chapter in the edited volume on the intersections between place and sexuality, the teachers reflected on the dearth of protections for LGBTQ+ individuals in their states at the time of my study as well as the way in which heteronormativity and homophobia surfaced in their schools. In my use of intersectionality in the chapter, I specifically focused on Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall's (2013) use of intersectionality as a way of "interrogating the ways that states constitute regulatory regimes of identity, reproduction, and family formation" (p. 785). While the United States has made advances towards equality for LGBTQ+ individuals with the 2020 Supreme Court decision prohibiting discrimination, the legacy of heteronormativity still persists in schools in and through such policies as *No Promo Homo* laws (McGovern, 2012) as well as school environments whereby heterosexuality is the *de facto* norm.

Returning to my experience teaching as a gay man in a rural part of the Southeastern United States, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall's (2013) description of intersectionality as troubling how states produce discourse/knowledge concerning identities, the state in which I formerly resided during my K-12 teaching career also (re)produced heterosexuality as the norm. When I first started teaching in 2011, the state of North Carolina enacted a constitutional ban against gay marriage. As I was living in a small town with my partner during the time, I passed many "marriage is one man and one woman" signs during my commute to school. As being gay in a rural area can be challenging (Kosciw et al., 2015), it drew my attention to the paucity of protections for those of us relegated to the wrong side of the binary. Although there are now protections in place, we might ask, what about the rural LGBTQ+ teachers who cannot or are unable to obfuscate their identities? While I was a K-12 teacher, I was able to eschew

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<sup>1</sup> According to McGovern (2012), no-promo-homo policies ban discussions related to LGBTQ+ individuals

questions related to my sexuality. However, those who identify as trans or non-gender conforming may confront different obstacles related to their gender and sexual identities. In connecting these ideas to the edited volume on intersectionality and LGBTQ+ issues, it is essential that those of us in the LGBTQ+ community recognize the difficulties experienced by other members in the community and the intersections between their various identities that may cause exclusion. In closing, it is important that we continue to trouble heteronormativity in our classrooms and schools so that we do not allow for inequality and exclusion to persist.

### **What's Next?**

When thinking of what comes next, the limit is our disciplinary imagination and what the more normative elements in it will deem valid and therefore imbued with the disciplinary value needed to open career pathways. What we need more of, however, are pieces of sustained, ethically executed, situated research projects that allow us to better understand how different intersections may be realized and what their potential impacts on teaching and learning are. Perhaps even more so, we need the discipline to imbue greater value in research projects that directly capture learning and educator voice in more than the soundbite-style we often see when sharing interview data. In order to understand intersectionality, truly understand it, we need intersectional research methods that create value around providing voice to the populations that we research and work with on a daily basis.

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**James Coda, Ph.D.** is a lecturer at Western Colorado University and an instructor in the Intensive English Program at the University of Georgia. His research addresses LGBTQ+ issues and queer theories/pedagogies in language education.

**J. M. Paiz, Ph.D.** is a teaching assistant professor of English for Academic Purposes at The George Washington University. Their work focuses on LGBTQ+-inclusivity and equity in language pedagogy and teacher education.

